

THE STUDENT IN THE SHADOW OF SCRIPTED CURRICULUM

By Becky R. Schulz

Miami University

It was a Wednesday afternoon, and I was in a 3rd grade classroom watching the last student head out the door. I had recently taken a role as a school administrator, and I was still trying to understand the flow of the school day. The teacher was walking around the room, picking up jackets and pencils and all the little things students drop on the floor throughout the day. As I walked towards the door, the teacher called out to me. She had been teaching at the school for many years, so I was a little confused by how nervous she seemed as she approached. She explained that the teachers were planning to make recommendations for the next year's class lists. She said there had been strict guidance in the past on how students should be grouped, and she wanted to know what my expectations were. I asked a few questions, which she graciously answered, and then I suggested that the class lists be created based on what was best for the students. The teacher looked at me for a long time, and I started to feel that maybe I had misunderstood the situation or what the teacher was asking, but then she replied, "No one has ever said that we should do it that way before."

Among the varied and contentious debates in education, it is easy to lose sight of the student. The widespread use of scripted curriculum, designed to provide a uniform, structured learning experience for all students, deprives teachers of their opportunity to apply their professional knowledge and experience to deliver the best instruction to their students (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020). Classroom practices that fail to see students as unique individuals have a significant impact on student self-image, social-emotional health, relationships, and academic performance and may lead to the unnecessary identification of learning disabilities or mental health diagnoses. This article employs the *currere* method to center the student experience within the greater conversation surrounding scripted curriculum.

The *currere* method employs a self-reflective process to help one develop a greater understanding of one's place and perspective in time (Pinar, 2019). Pinar suggests that past experiences frame the future one imagines and that by reflecting on both the past and the future, one can understand the present. Rejecting the belief that learning primarily occurs through presenting a list of objectives and measuring the outcomes, *currere* sees the path to learning as a personal, complicated journey of experiences and interactions with others. By synthesizing my educational experiences from student to administrator, I will use the *currere* method to illustrate how scripted curriculum is not student-centered and reveal the real-world consequences of ignoring students' needs.

CURRICULUM FRAGMENT 1: SIGNS OF SCRIPTED CURRICULUM IN THE CLASSROOM

The school year had been challenging. Every day, I was reminded that teachers can be very different, with distinct priorities, approaches, and habits. Over the years, I had worked with many teachers to guide curriculum decisions and empower them in their classrooms. I had developed a comprehensive understanding of the school's educational goals and priorities. I knew what curriculum was used in each grade, why it was chosen, and how teachers had approached it over

the years. I worked with teachers to accommodate students, reflect and adjust their classroom plans, and make decisions that made sense for their students and led to growth in their classrooms. But this year the make-up of the team had changed, which meant learning to adjust to different teaching styles, priorities, and habits. I was discovering that a new culture had developed—one that was much more rigid than I expected—and that creating change would be challenging.

Midway through the second quarter, a math teacher asked me to join a conference with parents who were very concerned for their child. I was trying to build a relationship with the teacher, so when I was asked to join the meeting, I was very willing. The student had failed math the first semester and was on track to fail the third quarter.

I met with the teacher ahead of the parent meeting to learn more about the class and why the teacher felt the student was struggling. The teacher explained that students had homework every day, which they received credit for completing but that she did not check or grade. The students also took quizzes and tests, which equated to 80% of their grade. This student had a high homework grade but seemed to be failing all quizzes and tests. I asked the teacher whether she knew why the student was failing the assessments or if she could identify gaps in his math skills. She said she really did not know. I suggested that the curriculum may include alternative practice pages to reinforce the critical skills, but she responded that he needed to learn to keep up with the class. I asked whether the student could receive credit for making corrections on tests, providing him with an opportunity to understand where he had made errors. The teacher explained that she did not believe that was something that was typically allowed.

We discussed that the student had ADHD, and the teacher felt he struggled to stay focused in class. She seemed to be familiar with various accommodations and modifications that could be effective, so I was confused about why the student had failed the first and second quarters, was continuing to fail, and why the teacher had no insight. When I suggested working with the student at the small table to better understand why he was struggling and give him targeted support, the teacher indicated she would consider it.

We met with the parents in the principal's office. The mother expressed concern about their child's math grades. The father explained that one of their parents had been very unwell for some months making it difficult for the family to keep up with regular life activities but that they did work with their son every evening, trying to help him understand and complete his math homework. The mother said it was challenging because they struggled to understand the math concepts, which made it difficult for the parents to explain them to him. Their son had been working with a tutor but was still failing his math quizzes. The mother explained that their son had also been seeing a counselor to help him with anxiety and that they had worked with their doctor to adjust their son's medication in hopes that it would help. The parents felt at a loss for what to do next.

The teacher had been quietly listening to their concerns. I tried to draw her into the conversation, suggesting that she may work with the student at the small table if the mother felt her son would be comfortable with that. The mother said yes, she was open to any suggestions. She asked the teacher if that was something the teacher typically did for struggling students. The teacher responded slowly, "No, we don't really do any small group work in this class." There was a brief silence at the table. The father explained that their son felt the class moved quickly, and he had trouble keeping up. The teacher replied, "I can't slow down the curriculum for one student" but did not offer any suggestions for helping the student in her class or at home.

As I sat next to the parents, I could feel their response. They seemed to deflate right before me, looking tired and defeated. I felt the weight of the rigid expectations and the parents'



powerlessness and defeat. I felt heartbroken for them and frustrated to the point of tears. I could not force the teacher to change her pacing or classroom practices. I knew there were many options for helping the student, and in the past, I would have insisted on them. However, this year, I seemed to be facing a powerful culture of high, rigid expectations, a culture that did not allow for flexibility or student-centered approaches. I was left with a suffocating sense of the gap between this uncompromising approach and everything I believed was important about education and teaching students.

REFLECTION

As a special education administrator, I interact daily with parents and students who are struggling to navigate school programs and expectations. These meetings often make me wonder what makes teachers respond so inflexibly to students. Do teacher beliefs and ideals drive this inflexibility? Is it a result of a school culture and administrator directives? Having gained a deeper understanding of scripted curriculum, I now ask myself, is it an inevitable result of the design and structure of the chosen school curriculum programs?

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

A classroom curriculum can be defined as the lessons and content knowledge shared with students throughout a year (Poetter, 2027). Who decides what content is taught, how it is taught, and to whom it is taught has been and continues to be a matter of much debate between educators, policymakers, and parents (Pinar et al., 2006). The role of the teacher as an expert in pedagogy, or the practice of presenting knowledge in the classroom, was only acknowledged in the last 35 years. Prior to that, teachers were primarily seen as the disciplinarians in the classroom, presenting information created by experts and keeping students on task. Shulman (1987) alludes to the complex and multidimensional role of teachers, emphasizing the importance of a teacher's ability to "transform the content knowledge he or she possesses into forms that are pedagogically powerful and yet adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by the students" (p. 15). Teachers are expected not only to take an active role in developing the curriculum they will use in the classroom, but also to differentiate the curriculum to meet the abilities and needs of their students. Dewey, the great educational reformer, "insisted that the child's experience must form the basis of the curriculum" (Pinar et al., 2006, p. 105).

Tracking the path to the widespread use of scripted curriculum is something like watching a snowball roll downhill, picking up more snow and growing broader with every rotation. Following the National Reading Panel (NRP) report, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2000 (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Rigell et al., 2022). NCLB mandated the use of scientifically based reading instruction methods to improve reading performance. Standardized testing mandates followed, leading to the development of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). With each development, greater pressure was placed on states to adopt scripted curriculum programs through federal funding incentives and school performance expectations. Publishers, in return, began creating scripted programs that provided research-based, explicit scripts for teachers to follow and promised educational gains for all students (Gallagher, 2005; Rigell et al., 2022). The momentum towards student-centered, teacher-driven instruction was effectively stalled.

I remember first becoming aware of the concept of scripted curriculum when my oldest son was in 4th grade. He hated reading class and kept failing spelling tests despite studying with me every evening. It was some years before I entered education, but I was an avid reader, and I knew his feelings about reading did not make sense, and his spelling grades did not match how hard he worked. By late in the first semester, he was becoming frustrated and defeated, so I met with the teacher to ask for help. I learned that in reading class the teacher read one book at a time, and all the students had to follow along. They were not allowed to read ahead, and the books did not sound like anything my son would be interested in. When I asked about his spelling grade, her response was to assure me that it would be fine; students did not really need to be able to spell, as they would have spellcheck in the future.

At first glance, the parent meetings I described may not seem directly linked to scripted curriculum, but they in fact illustrate its pervasive influence. The teacher's insistence on maintaining the curriculum's pace was not merely a personal preference but a manifestation of a system that prioritizes adherence to program schedules over authentic student learning. Similarly, in my son's case, the teacher's lack of curiosity or concern about his reading and spelling challenges reflected a culture in which compliance with the script outweighs responsiveness to individual needs. As Poetter (personal communication, February 26, 2026) observed, "Rigidity on policy and always hearing 'that wouldn't be fair to others' is almost always a sign that equity isn't valued."

Scripted curriculum programs are based on the theory that there is a scientifically validated method for teaching content and that, if this method is employed for every student, learning will occur (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Timberlake et al., 2017). These programs provide explicit scripts for teachers to follow, breaking each lesson into a series of steps, and leaving nothing for the teacher or student to do but follow each step to its learning objective (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020). Pitched as the answer for low-income and poor-performing districts, scripted curriculum programs claim to provide the instruction necessary for all students to reach the high standards set by the CCSS and standardized testing requirements. Proponents go one step further, suggesting that trained teachers are not necessarily needed, as anyone can follow scripted programs (Powell et al., 2017).

Gone are the days when teachers knew their students, understood their community, and created lessons that connected with students' experiences and identities (Rigell et al., 2022). State and district leaders increasingly defer to unknown curriculum experts, preventing local classroom teachers from weaving their students' experiences into their curriculum. As Poetter (2027) directly states, scripted curricula created by those outside the community "cannot address the particular, cultural norms of students in a community" (p. 214). Forcing teachers to follow a curriculum framed by the predominantly white perspective perpetuates the racist, colonialist messages that have been rooted in our country since its founding (Rigell et al., 2022; Valdez, 2020; Vaughn et al., 2021). Promoted as a means of creating equity by providing the same education to all students, these programs prevent teachers from facilitating any relevant cultural connections between the content and students' lives (Mahzoon-Hagheghi & Bruun, 2023; Wyatt, 2014). Wyatt (2014) is clear that "these programs are deliberately designed to be context-blind and treat all students in the same way, regardless of their background" (p. 452). Learning, however, does not occur in a vacuum but "is constructed when the individual seeks to reconcile the disjuncture between his or her current interpretations of the world with a discordant new experience" (Gallagher, 2005, p.148). If students' experiences, cultural identities, interests, and talents are not relevant to the



classroom curriculum, the teaching will not lead to the deep connections and student engagement needed for understanding.

CURRICULUM FRAGMENT 2: A STUDENT'S DAY (IN THE FUTURE?)

I always try to get to school early, but sometimes it's hard. Maybe I just don't want to go, so I drag my feet. Sometimes I don't have my homework done, so then I really move slowly. It's not that I don't want to do my homework; it's just that some of it is hard to understand, and I don't have anyone to help me.

Today, I'm three minutes early, so I'll probably make it to class on time. The line to get into school isn't too long, and after I scan my face for the attendance office, I rush to my first period class. At least I don't have to carry a backpack anymore. All of my work is on the small computer the school assigned me, and no one carries a backpack just for their little computer.

The computer-only program is new since my brother and sister were here. It's not that they didn't have computers. I guess they had these carts full of them in their classrooms. They used them for typing papers or learning how to research but not for every assignment or test. School was different for them. They used to do projects in their classes with posterboards and boxes and all kinds of craft supplies. My brother says they could even choose what kind of project they wanted to do. We don't do projects anymore, well, unless they're computer projects. Sometimes we do those.

As I walk into my reading class, I feel tired already. It's not that I don't like reading; I've read all of the Penderwick books, and I can't wait for the next one. But in my reading class, we don't have any books like that, and reading on a computer makes my eyes tired. I guess there used to be books, shelves and shelves of them in the library. The old reading teacher had the best reading nook in her classroom, with big cushions and fancy bean bag chairs. She had so many books to choose from, all sorted in different ways. My sister says she used to help sort them after school, which was one of her favorite things to do. Her teacher would make hot chocolate when it was cold outside and read to the class while everyone warmed up. It sounds wonderful. But we have a different reading teacher now, and the books aren't there anymore. I guess they were moved for more desks or something. Or maybe they thought we just didn't need them anymore. Even the library is now a "media center" with monitors and places to charge your computers instead of books.

Before we start the reading lesson, we always have to finish a bell ringer worksheet. Some days the paper will have 10 sentences with punctuation we have to correct; other days we'll have to write a paragraph about something we read the night before. I think the teacher makes us do them so we sit down and get busy as soon as we get into class, but I don't know. Today, we have to write our spelling words three times and then fill in the sentence blanks with the right vocabulary words. I already know our spelling words, but some kids don't, and anyway, you're not allowed to skip this part. Last year, my teacher gave me different spelling words, words that I didn't already know. Sometimes they were really hard, but my teacher taught me how to take them apart into pieces I could spell. This year, my teacher says we all have to learn the words listed in her teacher's book; she says we have to master them.

After the bell ringer, our teacher always assigns us a reading passage. It just pops up in our To-Do list. I guess there's a computer program that tells the teacher which story each of us should read. Sometimes she'll try to change someone's story, but her computer program doesn't seem to



like that, so maybe that's why she doesn't try very often. Anyway, our passage is never a complete story. You don't really know what happened before it or what will happen in the end. It's just a middle. Like *The Empire Strikes Back*. Just the middle of the story. That's my least favorite *Star Wars* movie.

Our teacher explained that we need to look for the story arc in today's passage. I think that's hard without the whole story, but our teacher says we should be able to do it with just the reading we have. That's what her teacher's book says. I think I'm a pretty good reader, but sometimes I feel like I'm not very smart. I just can't figure out the parts of today's story. It really feels like something important is missing. We never read any stories like *Star Wars* or *The Penderwicks*. It seems like it might be easier to do the reading work if the stories were interesting. Maybe if we could read the whole story in a book, it would be more interesting, and I could do a better job on my assignments.

Math class is next, and that always makes my stomach hurt. My mom says it's probably because it's right before lunch, but I think it's because math can be hard. She says my dad uses math every day, and you can do all kinds of interesting things when you understand it. But we don't do interesting things in math class, so I'm not sure about using it when I grow up. Sometimes we have to solve word problems about cars and long drives or how big the pool is in someone's backyard. I don't know anyone who has a pool in their backyard, but it seems like it would be cool. I guess being able to calculate how big one is might be helpful someday. That's what my teacher says, anyway.

My teacher always walks us through math problems at the beginning of class. She'll explain what we need to do to solve the problem, then ask us what she just said. It's weird how teachers do that. Yesterday, she said, "Area is length times width. What is area?" and we had to say, "length times width." Our teacher uses these hand signals so we all know what to repeat. And I guess if we repeat it enough times, it will get stuck in our brains, and we'll be able to figure out all kinds of math problems. I don't know. It doesn't seem to work that way for me. And the class moves really fast. I think it would be easier if it could slow down a little. Sometimes I just need to think for a minute, but I'm always afraid I'm going to miss something important. Maybe that's why my stomach hurts.

My teacher says we have to keep moving because if we slow down, we won't learn everything we need to know by the end of the year. But I'm not sure I'm learning everything anyway. I think if I could write the math problems on paper to work them out, it might be a little easier. My brother says he used to do that. But we don't use paper anymore, and my teacher says I need to be able to solve them on my computer. She says it has all the tools I need already built in.

My friend Matt has a really hard time understanding it. Sometimes he'll raise his hand to ask a question, but my teacher just flips through the book on her computer and gives an answer that doesn't seem to help, so most of the time he doesn't even ask anymore. He agrees with me that everything moves really fast. I think he could really use some paper, too, and someone to explain it a little differently. I think he could get it then.

REFLECTION

I wrote this fragment of a school day from a student's perspective as a progressive narrative only to realize it may be a present reality. The described instruction sounds boring and stressful

from the student's perspective, but it would qualify as "research-based" and adequate. If a student like Matt is struggling to follow this type of math instruction, does that mean he may have a math disability? Multi-Tiered Systems of Support programs prevalent in many schools are designed to eliminate special education qualifications that are unnecessary or unwarranted. However, the question may remain: Is the widespread use of scripted curriculum creating "the learning problems we seek to eliminate" (Gallagher, 2005, p. 146)?

CHILDREN OR ROBOTS?

The most insidious part of the scripted curriculum movement is the assumption that all students learn in the same way. Echoing critiques from disability studies scholars, this belief in a uniform standard erases the value of uniqueness and difference (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Timberlake et al., 2017). The high standards that underpin scripted curriculum place the entire burden of academic success on the student and pathologize those who do not fit the standardized mold (Gallagher, 2005; Timberlake et al., 2017). Teachers themselves are coming to believe that, if they follow the script, every student will meet the standard. Outdated beliefs that differentiation lowers expectations or "dumbs down" the instruction have resurfaced, proving that scripted curricula do not lead to equity for all students (Timberlake et al., 2017). In fact, a scripted curriculum, by its very nature, creates a systematic barrier that prevents teachers from using student-centered approaches in the classroom. Because the instruction must follow a strict, uniform script, low-achieving students, who may require a different approach or need to be engaged in the learning, are referred to special education to catch up or be "fixed" (Gallagher, 2005; Timberlake et al., 2017).

The year I co-taught 5th-grade ELA, I was paired with the building's literacy coach and one of those really gifted teachers. She taught reading three days of the week, and I taught writing the other two days. That year, I learned what school could really be like for students. Her student-centered approach, creativity, and enthusiasm spilled over into my writing lessons, and I learned that I could be creative and that my students would continue to grow in their writing. We used the ELA program as a scaffold, but the classroom curriculum we developed was much more engaging. By paying attention to each student and learning about their lives and interests, we were able to expose them to books that resonated with them and individualize our instruction so that all students could share and grow in their perspectives and experiences. That did not mean all students were expected to learn and show their learning in the same way but in a way that was right for them. That year, we made fairy floss and pancakes in the classroom, read a picture book at the beginning of every class, created a Thanksgiving parade video with the students, and ended the year with a wiffle ball game, hot dogs and all. Our students learned to trust us and be brave enough to work hard and try new things. They made great gains in reading and writing by the end of the year and headed into the summer with such hope for their next year of school.

Student needs and growth should be the north star for all school-based decisions. Teaching should be student-centered and begin with knowing students and their needs. Lessons should be relevant to the students in the classroom and allow them to take an active role in their learning as thinkers and doers, not just memorizers. All students should be represented and honored in the curriculum and should be led to think deeply and critically about the world and their role in it. As Poetter (2024) states, "education should reflect these life processes in order to prepare students for using/developing the processes to address life's challenges and to build their own knowledge" (p.



11). Ultimately, what we know as adults and educators should inform what students learn, but it should not be the only thing students learn (Berman, 1968). Students must have ownership of their learning, something that scripts simply cannot provide.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Approaching academic writing through examples of my own experience by following the *currere* method was a foreign concept for me. Asking myself, “what has been and what is now the nature of my educational experience” (Pinar, 1994, p. 20), required me to intentionally reflect on what I know and how I have come to know it, a task that felt like working a muscle I had left sedentary for too long. More than just reflecting, though, the *currere* method expected me to respect my knowledge and past experiences as valuable. In fact, Poetter (2025) suggests,

anyone interested in teaching and curriculum, in educating and learning as a learner and with other learners, at becoming better at it, figuring it out, making a contribution to the lives and progress of others, needs to start with the self. (p. 18)

He suggests that, by examining our lives and learning experiences, we can identify what truly drives us, and that this realization can guide us towards the future impacts we can have on the world.

My natural tendency to see others as the experts and disregard my own knowledge mirrors the experience of many teachers today who have been stripped of all autonomy and professional trust by being required to follow a teaching script designed by an unknown expert. The shift that must occur in education is one in which teachers are given permission to respect their knowledge and experiences, are expected to reflect on the nature of their learning and their knowledge of how students learn, and approach teaching as experts. This is the only way forward for the students who are our future. Equity requires much more than providing the same content in the same manner (Love, 2019). It requires teachers to create an environment in which all students are celebrated for their differences, their uniqueness, their pasts, and their futures, and in which instruction is differentiated to meet the needs of all students (Love, 2019; Vaughn et al., 2021).

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